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AUTHOR Thompson, Virginia L.
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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the rationale and design of the State Consultant Model developed for the six state northwest region of Alaska, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Oregon, and Washington for the dissemination of educational research information and other resources. The program defines dissemination, its components of resources and mechanisms, and the goals of the Dissemination Program at the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL). To provide an improved six state organizational strategy, the State Consultant Model is based on a team of four people, including a primary consultant, a backup staff person, technical assistance support, and a documentor; diagrams illustrate the use of the model. While the model has been found to be a viable dissemination strategy for the program at NWREL, three potential problem areas are indicated. (RAA)

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IMPROVEMENT OF DISSEMINATION DELIVERY STRATEGIES: DEVELOPING THE STATE CONSULTANT MODEL

Virginia L. Thompson, Director
Dissemination Program
Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory
Portland, Oregon

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INTRODUCTION

Dissemination designers and implementors frequently and without a second thought recommend to constituent groups that they apply the outcomes of research, development and experience to their professional work. But just as frequently, we do not heed our own advice.

The application of research and theory to ongoing, interactive dissemination strategies, however, has been an integral part of the work of the Research and Development Exchange (RDx), funded through the National Institute of Education (NIE). The RDx is a network of regional educational laboratories and university-based R&D Centers working to support efforts which are targeted to support school improvement efforts.

The Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL) in Portland, Oregon houses two projects which are parts of the RDx network. NWREL's Regional Exchange (NWRx) and Dissemination Support Services (DSS) together comprise the Dissemination Program, which supports, serves and interfaces constituent groups within and outside the NWREL service region. The primary focus and funding for the Dissemination Program's efforts is NIE through the Regional Program for activities of the RDx. It is through the combination of NWRx and DSS thrusts that we in the Dissemination Program have conceptualized, designed and implemented what we are calling the State Consultant Model of organization.

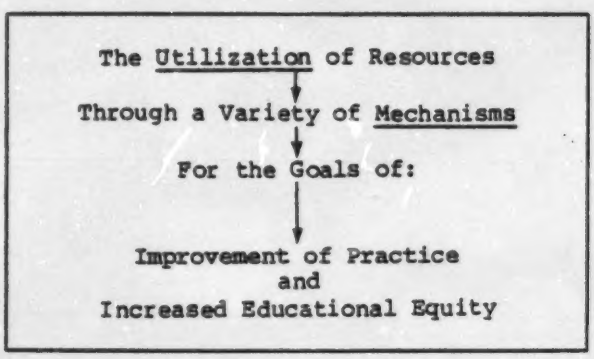
Staff of the Dissemination Program approach their work with the assumption that change is one of the constants of life. I frequently feel like we are on our local volcano, Mt. St. Helens, with 40 earthquakes an hour around us, as I

experience the excitement of the constituent groups and participate in the reactive and proactive approaches taken by the staff people who are sensing those constituents' needs and attempting to respond to them.

On other occasions I have the rare opportunity to experience our dissemination work the way I experience sitting high on a bluff at the Pacific Ocean, observing the ebb and flow of the tide. There are times when it feels like the work, the pressures and demands for creativity are at a ground swell and are lapping up over the sides, as it were. There are other times when the tide is out far enough that the tidepools can be observed, and I can cull out some of the treasures. The opportunity to think about the State Consultant Model has been one of these times.

The State Consultant Model is the result of the ebb and flow of the work of Dissemination Program staff to apply the results of R&D and our own experience base more creatively and efficiently to serve the needs of the constituents of our region.

For the sake of clarity it might be helpful to share the Program's definition of dissemination:



Each of the component parts of this definitional statement can be further explicated as:

Resources

For the purpose of our definition, resources are defined as:

- Knowledge--research documents, articles, new books, etc.
- Human--all of us, with our unique skills, talents and abilities
- Financial
- Products--new programs, curriculum materials, management systems, etc.
- Other--additional resources which could be bought, sold or bartered by groups or individuals

Mechanisms

Dissemination specialists use four words to describe ways in which resources can be utilized:

- Spread--one-way sending out of information
- Exchange--two-way sharing or multi-way flow of information
- Choice--facilitation of rational consideration and selection among a variety of possibilities
- Implementation--actually adopting and installing a new program or practice

In addition, we have added other mechanisms such as:

- Staff development--inservice and preservice experiences
- Knowledge transformation--taking pieces of research and reworking them into a new form more usable to a practitioner
- Knowledge synthesis--collecting four or five of the best pieces of knowledge and converting them to allow for greater, more immediate utilization by practitioners
- Formal and informal network development and utilization

Goals

Improvement of practice and increased equity are the dual mandated goals of NIE. The Dissemination Program likewise accepts them and uses the following interpretations to guide its work:

- Improvement of practice--continuous support for utilizing resources in order to function in better, more efficient and more productive ways
- Increased equity--support of processes for ensuring the provision of humanistic, multicultural experiences at all levels of the educational process.

RATIONALE

The first two years of Dissemination Program operation demonstrated a need for an improved organizational strategy in order for NWRx efforts to be maximally effective. Originally, a single staff person had primary responsibility for interactions with contact people in all six states of our region. While we were beginning to make official entry into the states as a regional exchange, this appeared to be an efficient way of organizing the Program and did enable us to do initial needs assessment and design work. Several factors, however, revealed that this organizational strategy was insufficient to meet the needs of our constituents over time. For one thing, travel distances in our region present formidable challenges to a field-based program such as ours. All of our states are characterized by vastness and some of them by miles of desolate, uninhabited countryside. Although magnificent in its beauty, this creates extreme problems for dissemination planners in the states. It also creates problems for us as a regional laboratory.

Secondly, once entry into an organization such as an SEA has been made by an external agent such as the NWRx, common goals established and long-range strategies agreed to, the amount of work to be done increases dramatically. It become evident to us, moreover, that one individual change agent did not have all of the necessary skills, personality traits and abilities to serve even one of the states fully—much less all six.

At the same time, needs sensing and other activities conducted with the NWRx Advisory Group indicated that they were ready for more direct, ongoing and intensive interaction with our staff than our previous method of organization was equipped to provide. Concluding that our approach to working with the SEAs in the region needed to be changed, we reexamined past efforts, present conditions, scope of work and resources and began conceptualizing what has become the State Consultant Model.

DESIGN OF THE STATE CONSULTANT MODEL

The NDx has four national support services available to assist the regional exchanges. One of these is the Dissemination Support Service at NWREL. We have, then, within the Dissemination Program, a national and a regional function. There are times when the national function—the Dissemination Support Service—is, in reality, serving the regional needs of the Northwest Regional Exchange. Such was the case in the design work leading to the development of the State Consultant Model. NWRx made a request to the DSS to assist them to conceptualize and implement a new mode of operation.

Research, development and experience had, we were convinced, produced change agent and linking models which could be applied to the current needs of the SEAs in the region, the strengths and weaknesses of our existing staff, the scope of work and the available resource base. Conceptualization began, drawing heavily on the work of Havelock, Crandall, Hood, Argyris and others.

During a very intensive work session, staff were guided through a decision making sequence which enabled them to explore, study and accept or reject alternative approches to staff organization. At the end of the session, the total staff had arrived at a consensus on a design for operation, a process for defining roles and functions and a plan for refining and operationalizing what we called the State Consultant Model.

THE DESIGN

From the beginning the conceptualization of the State Consultant Model was that of a team of four people:

- Primary consultant. The primary consultant is the staff person who is assigned to a state and who is the major contact of the SEA person to the program: The primary consultant functions as coordinator, manager, planner, implementor, provocateur, etc.

- Backup staff person. Total knowledge of the plans, requests, and people of an SEA cannot reside with only one staff person. It is critical to have, in a backup position, another staff member able to assume a primary contact role in the event of the absence of the primary consultant.

- Techanical assistance support. Use of the consultant model implies, to us, utilization of a broad range of consultant skills, intervention strategies, designs, and so forth. There are, in DSS, staff skilled in these areas. As an external/internal assister, they are frequently needed to provide a new perspective, a different technique.

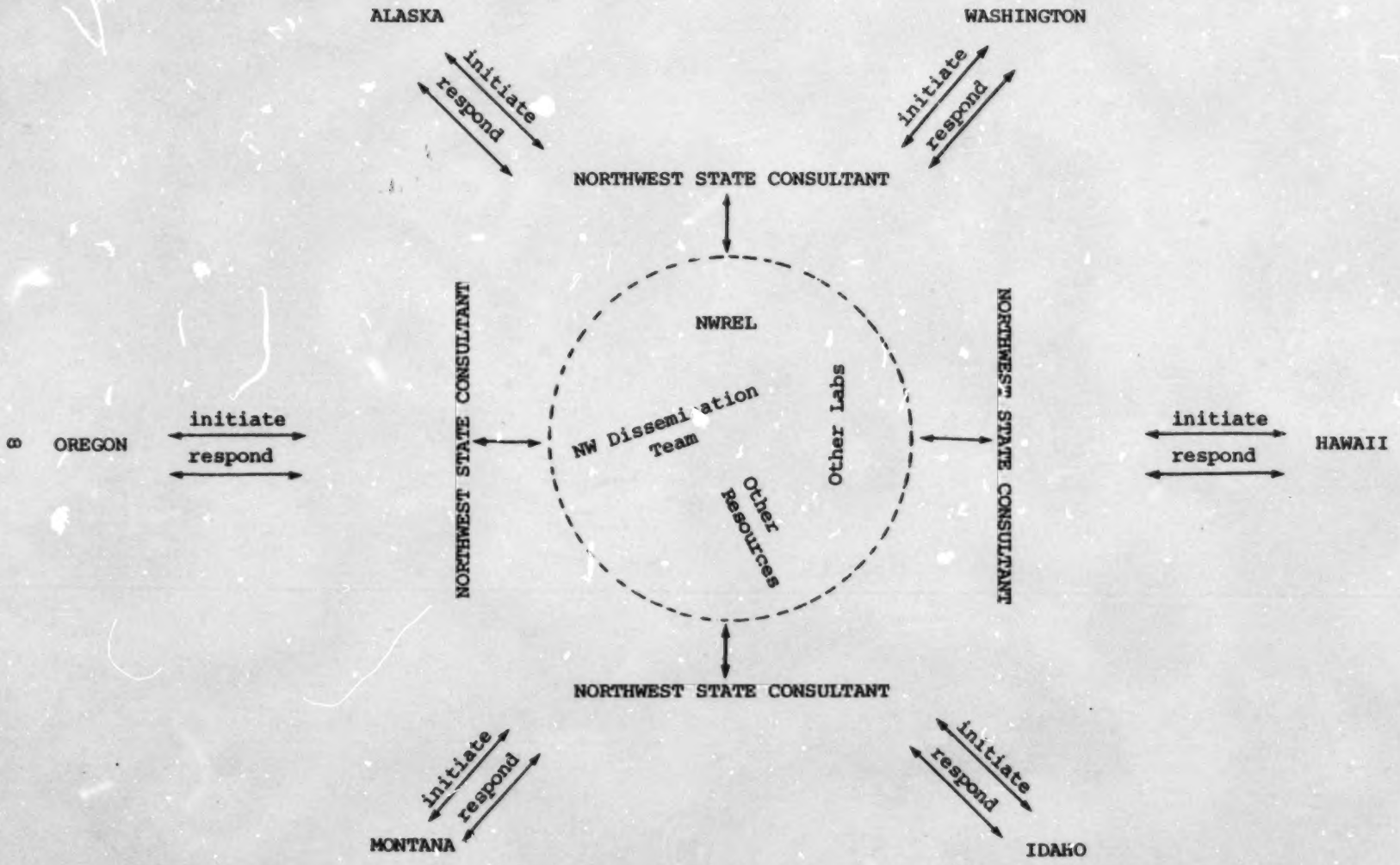
- Documentor. For purposes of tracking, collecting data and documenting interventions, the consultant team needs the skills, techniques, and abilities of a staff person charged with these responsibilities.

At this point, if anyone has been keeping track and taking a count, that is a total of four people for each state, and since the NWRx serves six states, the assumption might well be that the Dissemination Program's Rx has a staff of 24 people. In reality, however, the consultant arrangement functions with seven people interchanging positions and with constant attention being given to the clarification of roles and functions. In addition, staff of the program functioning in primary consultant roles operate on the assumption that the full resources of the Dissemination Program, NWREL and other national sources are available to be applied to the identified needs of the SEAs. The diagram on the following page graphically displays the plan for implementing this model.

Another way of depicting the role of the consultant is the diagram on page 9. The display portrays the various roles a consultant performs in different arenas.

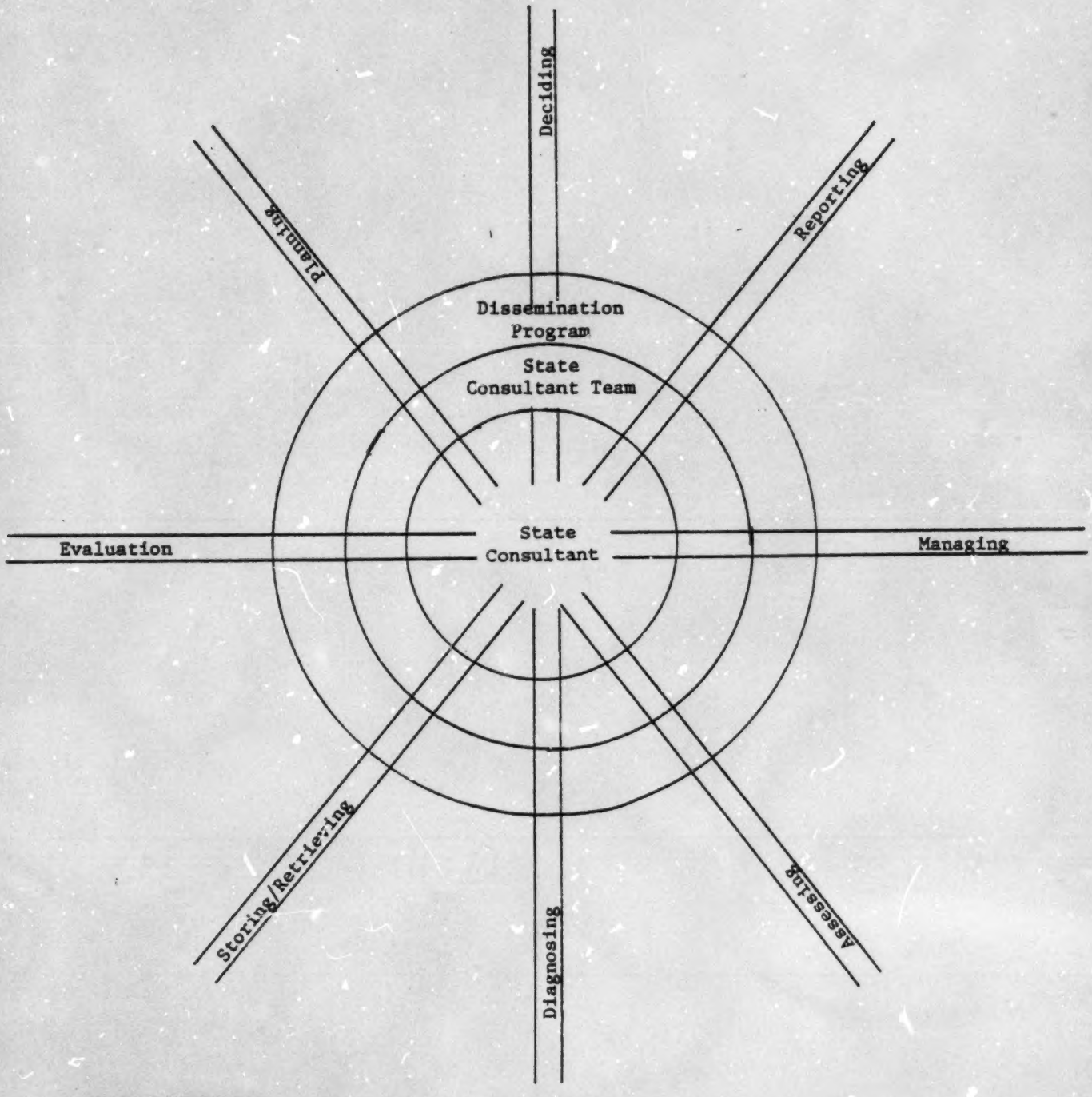
A tool which has proven extremely useful in the implementation of the consultant model is the state action plan. One of the requirements of the Dissemination Program staff persons who serve as primary consultants is to develop, in cooperation with each state, an action plan for the particular contract year. As might be expected, this is not easy, because the particular demands of a state change, as do the particular requirements that that state staff person may be required to perform. Therefore, there is a degree to which we within the Program have to remain flexible and able to respond to the changing needs of the state at different points in time. Nevertheless, the requirement for a state action plan has allowed us within the program to plan the activities and interventions with each of our states individually and also to identify and plan for several regional efforts. The regional thrusts derive directly from the individual state plans as these reveal shared priorities across states.

THE NORTHWEST REGION



STATE CONSULTANT PLAN

Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory
DISSEMINATION PROGRAM


Deciding
Reporting
Planning
Dissemination
Program
State
Consultant Team
Evaluation
State
Consultant
Managing
Storing/Retrieving
Diagnosing
Assessing

CONCLUSION

From the perspective of the NWREL Dissemination Program, the consultant model is a viable dissemination strategy. With this design, as with any, however, there are potential problem areas. Those we have identified include:

1. A tendency for "ownership" problems to surface. In times of limited resources and abundance of work to be accomplished, an aggressive consultant could over-promise services to one SEA.

2. Teamwork and collaboration are time-consuming. The consultant model is built on the premise that teams of staff meet, plan and frequently implement designs. A balance constantly has to be struck which assures cost-effectiveness.

3. The consultant teams mean a continuous changing of roles for a single staff person. Therefore, singular staff assignments rarely occur. Rather, it is critical to have clarity of role and function for a particular task.

One of the Dissemination Program's operating assumptions is that improvement of practice and increased equity--the two major goals of the program--are not achieved through the efforts of individuals or of singular organizations or institutions. Our goals can only be accomplished by working collaboratively through interorganizational arrangements. The consultant model, from my perspective, enables one organization to work more effectively and efficiently with constituent groups.

One of my colleagues has frequently talked about the "improveable product." That's how I view the consultant model. Needs have been expressed by constituent groups, alternative strategies investigated, a design set in motion; and we continue to learn, revise, redesign and implement. As you will hear later on, another regional exchange has taken a design, rethought it, and improved upon it. That, in my view is effective dissemination.